

Feeding the Emperor, Reading the Empire: The Cultural Implications of Food in
Suetonius' *Lives of the Twelve Caesars*

Although readers of Suetonius' *Lives of the Twelve Caesars* might perceive food as of secondary importance in this collection of biographies, close scrutiny of these texts in their literary and cultural context reveal that culinary references carry significant symbolic weight. My paper argues that Suetonius uses food to characterize not only individual emperors, but also the Roman Empire itself. In this inquiry, I focus on food's overarching aspects in Suetonius, which I have categorized under sustenance, society, and spectacle.

Methodologically, the paper employs a philological reading of these biographical works with an eye to the emperor's socio-political role as Rome's physical representative. Various scholars have examined the functions of eating in Roman comedy and poetry, while others have discussed the importance of imperial gustation, and yet others have analyzed the implications of physicality in Suetonius (Gowers 1993; Bartsch 2015; Goddard 1994; D'Arms 1999; Rohrbacher 2010; Gladhill 2012). Nevertheless, the symbolic significance of food in Roman biography deserves more attention; to that end, I offer a close reading of passages referring to eatables in the twelve *Lives*. I examine gustatory allusions in Suetonius by comparing them with descriptions by other imperial authors, as well as applying the notion that I call "the Emperor's Two Bodies" – the idea that the emperor's body was a valued entity both as itself and as a representation of the Empire. Although I have borrowed the term from medieval and renaissance political theory, it is readily applicable to Suetonius' Latin text (Kantorowicz 2016; Gladhill 2012). Consequently, if the emperor embodies the Empire, then imperial eating in the *Lives* merits serious consideration.

Using this combination of literary examination and socio-political theory, the paper considers the significance of cuisine in Suetonius in terms of sustenance, society, and spectacle. In the realm of sustenance, Suetonius ties the function of food as a nourishing necessity to traditional Roman frugality and virtue. One example appears in assertions that Augustus preferred simple edibles and frequently refused to eat at banquets, which align with Augustan attempts to reform Roman morality (Suetonius, *Aug.* 76-77). With reference to society, food serves as both an essential ingredient for community and an important indicator of trouble within that community. In one case, Agrippina's distrust of a fruit received from Tiberius serves as an emblem of the widespread patrician concern about his intentions (Suetonius, *Tib.* 80). Finally, in the area of spectacle, the text likens the atmosphere at the emperor's table to the political climate of the Roman state. For instance, the overindulgent meals of Vitellius reveal not only personal gluttony, but also – by extension – the widespread chaos during the Year of the Four Emperors (Suetonius, *Vit.* 3.13). Conversely, Vespasian's dinners, intended to boost the economy, reflect the prosperity and stability of his reign (Suetonius, *Vesp.* 1.19). In sum, by reading food in the *Lives* symbolically, one finds social and political criticism imbedded in Suetonian descriptions of imperial eating habits.

Overall, Suetonius posits a general correlation between simple or communal eating and Roman social virtue. On the other hand, immoderate meals reflect a corrupted Empire. The sustaining, social, and sensational functions of Suetonian food reveal a unified cultural commentary in depictions of imperial gustatory inclinations found in the *Twelve Caesars*. For Suetonius, food reveals not only the temperament of the emperor himself, but also the character of the Empire he ruled.

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